

SOPA Update: Still Terrible, And Misinformation Makes It Worse

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Legislators' ignorance of technology and bogus industry numbers about piracy are hindering meaningful debate on the Internet censorship bill.

The Internet is safe—at least until Congress returns.

In mid-December, a House Judiciary Committee markup of the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) rejected almost every amendment intended to address concerns about the controversial legislation, and further hearings were postponed until 2012, as early as this week.

The proposed legislation has caused uproar among technical and legal experts, innovators, and everyday Internet users alike for threatening the freedom and basic structure of the Internet while failing to meaningfully impact the piracy issues that the bill seeks to solve.

[\(The Terrible, Horrible, No-Good, Very Bad Internet Censorship Bills\)](#)

The Judiciary Committee markup often rose to the level of farce. At one point, Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, caused a stir by [Tweeting](#) about how bored he was during the proceedings. (So bored, he was “surfing the Internet,” possibly even perusing sites threatened by the bill like Facebook or YouTube.)

Worse than obvious gaffes like King's, however, was the open display—and at times even celebration—of technical ignorance by legislators.

“Last night I had a horrifying dream that a group of well-intentioned middle-aged people who could not distinguish between a domain name and an IP address were trying to regulate the Internet,” wrote Alexandra Petri on a Washington Post [blog](#). “Then I woke up and the Judiciary Committee's SOPA markup was on.”

“I'm not a nerd, but...” became a common opening line by legislators. The display inspired Motherboard's Joshua Kopstein to write a widely distributed post titled “[Dear Congress, It's No Longer OK to Not Know How the Internet Works.](#)”

Tech industry experts have long [complained](#) that their grievances about SOPA have gone unheard—even as members of Congress claim that the industry has offered no solutions and has no reason for concern.

A large part of this problem may be, as author Clay Johnson argues, that the tech world [doesn't lobby as well as other industries](#). A congressman who is no expert in biotech is likely to be thoroughly informed on biotech issues by pharmaceutical company lobbyists; the same doesn't always hold true for Internet issues.

Indeed, supporters of the legislation have [spent four times more on lobbying](#) than SOPA opponents.

Another problem plaguing the debate is misinformation: members of Congress are being swayed by misleading statistics.

As Julian Sanchez of the Cato Institute [reports](#), frequently cited statistics by SOPA supporters—for instance, that piracy causes 750,000 lost jobs per year and an annual loss of as much as \$250 billion to the U.S. economy—are utterly baseless. The figures come from garbled summaries of decades-old studies which had a much broader scope than intellectual property theft.

Another widely used statistic—that piracy costs the U.S. economy \$58 billion—is also bogus, according to Sanchez. Motion Picture Association of America chair Chris Dodd [cited that figure in a recent talk](#) at the Center for American Progress, our parent organization. Not only does the study cited come from a biased source, but the methodology inappropriately uses economic multipliers to inflate the numbers and broadens the scope to non-U.S. markets that would be unaffected by SOPA or similar bills.

Meanwhile, pushback against the legislation is intensifying. A boycott against [GoDaddy.com](#) for its support of SOPA ultimately pressured the company to renege its support.

And even Hollywood is divided on the legislation: Some [Hollywood union members](#) are now urging their SOPA-supporting bosses to reconsider.

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